

THE DEATH OF A CULTURE

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a certain point at least, the take increases geometrically with the number of persons participating.

In gardening, also, which was not practiced collectively, their small number decreased Trumai security. It was common for nearly all the village men to plant their gardens in clearings adjacent to those of their neighbors. Obviously, if one part of such a single, extended clearing was improperly fired, or if the crops were destroyed by armadillos or wild pigs, the whole village might be without food. Crop failure for a variety of causes is common in the tropical forests, but most aboriginal communities in South America have several separated garden clearings, each owned by an individual or extended family. If one garden fails, the family can, in a period of emergency, reap from others. Oberg relates that the Trumai once had to turn for food to the Kamayura,⁴ perhaps because of the failure of the village clearing.

It is, of course, possible that in the past the Trumai organized their gardens along the more rational lines of the Kamayura;⁴ and it is also possible that they never made a proper ecological adaptation subsequent to their arrival in the upper Xingú region. But lacking information on their economy prior to their decimation, we cannot make any firm statement on these points. However, it is certain that, despite their small numbers, the individual Trumai could have cleared and planted much more land. The average size of the gardens observed by Quain was one-half acre, and this area had to feed up to four people. Many men also had old gardens which were planted only to manioc. According to Quain's calculations, the total acreage of Trumai gardens was only a little over thirteen. Since yields from forest soils are not high, it is evident that this very small area must have barely met the needs of a population of 43 persons. Manifestly, the Trumai did not work hard enough; and it seems evident that their lack of application did more to impoverish them than any other single factor.

If the other upper Xingú tribes are used as criteria to establish what Trumai society was like before its decline, some very serious dysfunctions within Trumai social structure soon become apparent. To be sure, such a comparison is an arbitrary procedure; and it is only invoked here for its heuristic value. Since village and house patrilocality is the usual mode of residence among the Trumai, a household similar to that of the Kamayura, and with like functions, might be expected and might indeed have existed in the past. However, the Trumai death rate in 1938 was so high that these units disintegrated before they had gone beyond the embryonic stage. House membership was shifting, the number of persons involved small, and leadership nebulous. And since kinship was the principal mechanism for structuring interpersonal relationships in Trumai society, this lack of a stable, kin-structured unit probably did

⁴ Oberg 1963, p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.